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## Article

# Why Take Young Children Outside? A Critical Consideration of the Professed Aims for Outdoor Learning in the Early Years by Teachers from England and Wales

Helen Bilton <sup>1,\*</sup> and Jane Waters <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Institute of Education, University of Reading, London Road Campus, 4 Redlands Road, Reading RG1 5EX, UK

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Education and Communities, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Swansea, Townhill Road, Swansea SA2 0UT, UK; jane.waters@uwtsd.ac.uk

\* Correspondence: h.o.bilton@reading.ac.uk; Tel.: + 44-0-118-378-2683

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**Abstract:** This comparative study between Wales and England was undertaken to better understand what influences or drives the professed aims for outdoor provision of early years teachers; specifically the extent to which professed aims reflect the research-based literature common to both countries, and/or statutory curricular, which differs in each country. The research gathered quantitative and qualitative data through an online survey. Participants were teachers of children aged four to five years working in the respective country's University partnership schools. Partnership schools are those who work with the University to train teachers. The findings suggest Welsh teachers aim and plan to use their outdoor spaces explicitly for curriculum-related learning more so than their English counterparts who appear not to identify such specific curriculum-related learning outcomes but to emphasise personal/social/dispositional aspects of development for young children when outside. This research indicates how the divergence of education-related policy and curriculum appears to have impacted upon the way practitioners express their aims for outdoor learning in England and Wales. The values underpinning the relative curricular documentation appear to emerge in the intended practice of early years teachers in both countries. The values underpinning the academic discourse related to provision for outdoor activity is much less prominent in the responses to the surveys from English and Welsh teachers.

**Keywords:** outdoor learning; curriculum aims; Foundation Phase, Wales; Foundation Stage, England; outcomes

## 1. Introduction: Framing the Problem

Peters (1966), through his seminal work *Ethics in Education*, ensured the philosophy of education became a central aspect of the debate about the features by which we distinguish the activities of education from other human pursuits [1]. Critical to this debate was an attempt to consider what pursuits and endeavours are worthwhile within education and, furthermore, a deliberation over the aims of education. Here, aims are not the outcome or the end product of education but rather the purpose or reason for that education, based on theoretical underpinnings. Importantly the products or outcomes of educational pursuit are inextricably linked with the journey or process associated with it. Prominent in discussing and focusing attention on the aims of education over the last decades has been the work of John White. White (2010) argues that without an understanding of the aims of education the substance of the action within the school setting will surely suffer as teachers are unclear as to why they act as they do [2]. As Reiss and White (2013) suggest, having an aims-based curriculum

(ABC) ‘will constantly be reminding learners, teachers and planners alike that larger, global aims lie behind them, which lead back to central questions about what education should be for’ ([3], p. 66). Alexander (2010) furthers this debate in the extensive Cambridge Review of Primary Education, stating that aims, that is the purpose, have to involve a moral standpoint and therefore have to involve an internal discussion for each teacher to ensure their actions align with the given purpose [4]. He calls for teachers to audit their own value judgements against the teaching they are offering to ensure they do not compromise the education offered. In summary then, teaching is viewed as an active process involving a constant act of reflection, ensuring the teaching approach is consistent with the school setting and external pressures. Furthermore, although teaching approaches are bound to be influenced by external pressures, academic discourse and school setting, they are inherently underpinned by cultural values and moral standpoints [5]. The stated aims for educational provision therefore should reflect the agreed purposes of that provision with a setting or context. The reflective alignment by teachers of provision to purpose supports the coherence of the educational experiences offered by the setting. This clearly has to be so whichever phase of education is being considered.

A phase of education which has been under particular scrutiny is that of the early years (3–5 years of age), despite being differently organised in the respective countries of the UK [6]. This phase was noted in the Education Act of 1918 as being significant in the development of young children but has never been made a compulsory phase of education in the UK, with statutory school attendance beginning in the term after a child turns five years of age. The non-statutory nature of the early years phase of education has led to societal and Governmental debate about its significance, yet recently there has been increasing recognition internationally that long term outcomes for children are heavily influenced by the quality of learning environment experienced in their early years (for example, [7]). This is particularly important for children from less advantaged backgrounds [7,8]. However, the attributes of the environment are strongly influenced by the characteristics of the staff. Quality of the early years workforce has been mixed in the UK, from those with high levels of academic training to those with very little or no training. Over the years this has led to a number of empirical research reports looking at the roles, deployment and understanding of those working in this phase. These reports have for the most part been consistent in their messages. For example all have underlined the extent to which children’s learning outcomes are related to teachers’ level of qualifications, with knowledge of pedagogy and of child development being especially important [9–13]. In other words, children make better progress when they are taught by teachers who have theoretical understanding including an understanding of the aims of education and how to achieve them. Indeed the most recent of these reports—the independent review of early years qualifications [11]—presents 19 recommendations emphasising the need for early years staff to have good knowledge of the learning and developmental needs of children and of how to enhance and extend teaching and learning opportunities.

If this line of argument is followed through, that is, an understanding of the aims and purpose of education being important for good outcomes for children, then querying the aims and purpose of provision in the outside space of an early years setting becomes an important task. Provision of an environment outside for teaching and learning in the early years is not a new concept, with the first English nursery (early years) school being opened in London in 1914, with most of the education happening outside in the garden [14]. At this time the Nursery Garden was associated with an explicit belief that children flourished in the fresh air, and that exploratory play and physical activity were essential to provision. The outdoor space became a traditional component of “Nursery” provision in the UK until the latter decades of the twentieth century which saw a declining amount of independent Nursery provision and an increasing amount of early years provision being associated with primary school settings; this in turn led to a lessening of outdoor provision for young children as well as a diluted rationale for such provision with fewer early years staff embracing the value of the outdoors for young children [15]. This position was challenged at the turn of the century, alongside concern about the impact of sedentary lifestyles on children’s physical and mental health [16,17], and from the late 1990s the value of the outdoor space for young children grew in legitimacy within the UK.

The English Early Years statutory framework enshrined the outdoor environment in statute [18] and, following Wales' devolution from UK central government in 1999, the Foundation Phase Framework for Children's Learning for 3–7 years olds in Wales [19] established an explicit requirement for young children to experience a significant proportion of their early years provision in the outdoors. All teachers have to follow statutory curricular frameworks and assessment regimes and an outdoor environment and outdoor pursuits are expected to be provided in early years settings [19,20]. However, most recently the emphasis on this space has been significantly lessened under English legislation (further discussed below).

For the purposes of this paper, outdoor provision and outdoor learning are taken to mean the experiences that children have when outside during curriculum time, that is experiences that have been planned and are framed by the adults' intentions for children's learning. We are *not* referring to children's outdoor "playtime", during "breaks" in the planned learning activities, typically, in the morning, lunchtime and afternoon. Therefore outdoor learning is planned learning activity that may be organised within the confines of the school environment and beyond, including playful encounters with materials, objects and equipment.

Since the late 1990s there has also been a growing body of international literature and research into the early years outdoor environment, particularly regarding the practical aspects of working outside, of persuading staff as to its benefits and the educative purposes of this space. Therefore, there has been an emphasis on practice within the educational environment rather than on the theory behind it [21]. Although there are some empirical studies looking at the aims and values of teachers in the UK for outdoor education [22–25] these are context-specific. In a survey and interview study carried out in a rural part of England, on teachers' attitudes, practice and aspirations in settings for 2–11 year olds, Waite (2011) records the popularity among teachers of outdoor pursuits, in order from high to low: physical activity, personal and social development, other areas of learning, e.g., language and literacy, environmental education and creative activities [25]. Although aims are mentioned by respondents, this is more in terms of benefits of outdoor education rather than in terms of its purpose (the strict definition of "aim"). Bilton's (2014) survey examines the professed aims of early years teachers in south east England and from this suggests that many teachers are unclear as to the aims for outdoor education with some confusing aims with the action occurring within the setting [22]. Recent research on this topic in Wales is rarer but a 2007 study by Maynard and Waters does highlight the ambiguous understanding of what outdoor provision is for in that context; i.e., its purpose at the time of the introduction of the Foundation Phase in Wales [23]. Maynard's (2007) work at the same time highlights the tensions inherent in provision when purposes are not aligned: in this example when learning-goal-oriented purposes clash with personal-development-related purposes [24].

This present comparative study between Wales and England was undertaken in order to better understand what influences or drives the professed aims for outdoor provision given by early years teaching staff; specifically to explore the extent to which professed aims reflect the research-based literature common to both countries, and/or statutory curricular documentation, which differs in each country. Comparative studies can be important in providing insights into the ways in which differing educational systems with differing curricular frameworks impact on pedagogic practice and outcomes for children. The limitation of this approach is that countries do have different cultures, histories and societal values. Therefore straight critical comparison between countries often seized upon by Governments is unhelpful [26,27]. However, Raffe, Brannen, Croxford, Martin (1999) suggest 'home international' comparisons, between the constituent countries of the UK—England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales could be both useful and valid [28]. Whilst there are clearly differences between England and Wales they are significantly less marked than with those in any other international comparison. Taylor, Rees and Davies (2013) [29] comparing the findings from the UK Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) further suggest there is an element of "controlling" the external factors when comparing the "home countries" and this helps towards making the relationship between policies, implementation of policy and outcomes possibly clearer, and offering new insights.

For children to achieve well in early years education they need well qualified teachers who have theoretical knowledge particularly in regard to child development and pedagogy [7]. An aspect of this theoretical knowledge includes teachers' understanding of the aims and purposes of the education and the subsequent learning outcomes established to achieve those aims. This study set out to gather early years teachers' stated aims and learning outcomes for outdoor learning in two closely related countries—England and Wales. These findings are then considered in terms of how teachers' aims for children's outdoor learning relate to provision as implied by learning outcomes, relative curriculum frameworks and academic discourse.

## 2. Literature Review

This section looks at what might drive teachers' approach to early years outdoor learning: the academic discourse or curriculum frameworks or both. England and Wales are influenced by the same academic discourse but not the same curricula frameworks.

The place of education of the young child has gained status in recent decades, with a realisation that early education can impact lives significantly, especially for those who experience the most disadvantage (for example, [7,30]). This more positive attitude to early years education has led to reforms by countries, for example, Australia [31]; England [18]; New Zealand [32], Wales [33,34]. The purpose of the focus on improvement in early years provision globally can be aligned with social, economic and political aims as well as those associated with improved educational outcomes for individual children.

Alongside this reform of early years education and improved access to it has also come a broadening understanding of where early years education can take place, including outdoors. There have been a number of reports in the UK looking at learning outside across all age phases arguing its value and presenting relevant research evidence, for example see [35–38]. The inspection regime in England commented that learning outside contributed significantly to the raising of standards and improvements to children's personal and social development [39].

However, in the last five years there has been a significant shift between England and Wales, with the latter showing more Governmental interest in the outdoor environment and the former much less. In the most recent English curricular framework there has been a marked reduction in references to outdoors and not even an expectation to provide an area attached to the classroom, simply access to outside [20]. In the previous statutory documents the outdoor environment was presented as an integrated part of the whole and had many references and training materials extolling the importance of working outside with young children [40]. In Wales the emphasis placed on using the outdoor environment as a resource for children's learning in the early years, as outlined in the Foundation Phase documentation in 2008, has been developed and supported in the intervening years by subsequent guidance material (for example, [41]). There is an expectation across Wales that all children regularly access the outdoors as an integral part of their early years provision. Most recently in 2015 the statutory requirements of the Literacy and Numeracy Framework were aligned within revised curricular documentation for the Foundation Phase areas of learning: language, literacy and communication skills and mathematical development; thus effectively extending the Literacy and Numeracy Framework to the 3–5 years age range. In contrast, in England in 2012 although literacy and numeracy were added to the curricular documentation, they were not aligned to any overall policy concerning literacy and numeracy.

Therefore, in a relatively short space of time, Wales and England have created quite different policy frameworks for early years provision; England clearly lessening the importance of the outdoor environment as a location for children's planned learning experiences and Wales emphasizing its importance.

Turning our attention to the research literature, the academic discourse associated with outdoor provision in the early years is consistent across England and Wales, and as Waite argues, has at times been almost "evangelical" ([25], p. xix). The extent to which this discourse is supported by empirical



evidence is mixed. The physical, social, emotional, linguistic and cognitive benefits of outdoor play and learning are recurrent themes in the literature [22], although in many studies the focus still rests with the practice of outdoor education rather than explicitly exploring the aims, see for example, [15,25,42–51]. However, considering outdoor learning more broadly rather than simply early years, Dillon, Morris, O'Donnell, Reid, Rickinson and Scott (2005) [37] found from their extensive review that the evidence base for cognitive and physical/behavioural benefits is less strong than for affective and interpersonal/social outcomes.

Regarding studies into what influences teachers' actions, Waite [25,48,49] considered barriers and solutions to outdoor learning in 334 settings and concluded from qualitative data that governmental requirements influence what is offered through early years education, in respect of opportunities offered outside by staff. Teacher independence is often undermined by Governmental requirements according to Alexander's (2010) review of primary education in England [4]. While Stephen (2006) recognises the influence of policy makers, she also highlights that of society more broadly and of practitioners, underlining that the view of the child, childhood and learning will vary across nations [52]. A study of 100 final year undergraduate education students in two universities evidences a clear dissonance between what they felt was appropriate to teach and what they felt compelled to teach [53]. There was an evident tension between the approach expounded by academic texts and the pressures of the statutory documentation. Brown and Feger (2010) [54] report on three of their nine participants in a qualitative study to understand the complex process of understanding one's identity as an early childhood educator. The authors note the conflict trainee teachers had between the taught and practical component of their training, between the research and the assessed statutory component of education. A longitudinal study of nine teachers Bennett, Wood and Rogers (1997) [55] looked at teaching through play and found that there was a disconnect between values and action; indeed the teachers felt constrained by many things, including the requirements of the National Curriculum and importantly were often unaware that their beliefs did not match their actions. These studies collectively suggest there are many constraints on teacher action and a tension between what is understood by teachers and their action in the setting.

Finally, we might ask why it is important to know what influences teacher action and why does it matter in an outdoor environment. We argue that since young children's activity in outdoor space is a statutory requirement then what happens in that space needs to be effective for children's learning. A number of studies suggest that lack of attention to aims and purpose of provision and a focus on simply action within the setting could in fact be perpetuating a system of inequality of access to education. Browne (2004) [56], Stephen (2012) [21] and Waller (2010) [57] consider the negative outcome of focusing on practice which Browne describes as "the truths" ([56], p. 157) and Stephen refers to as "folk beliefs" ([21], p. 277) underpinning that practice. Browne suggests that such "truths" can be misinterpreted and can create poor practice, including gender inequality [56]. Indeed following the initial evaluation of the pilot of the Foundation Phase in Wales reference was made to "mixed messages" ([58], p. 56) being received regarding play in the Foundation Phase, resulting in a *laissez faire* approach to children's play in which 'less attention was paid to adult pedagogy and...some staff were not always gainfully and appropriately deployed' [58]. Sandseter [59,60] and Waller, Sandseter, Wyver, Arlemalm-Hagser and Maynard (2010) reveal that the values of the adults involved with children impact upon whether they allow children to take part in risky play or not. These studies indicate that indeed it does matter that staff do understand, and reflect upon, the aims and purposes of the educational experiences they offer [61].

We know that teacher action when working in the early years outdoor environment is influenced by external factors but we do not know if those actions are influenced more by curricular documentation or by research literature and theoretical input. The two countries, England and Wales, have different policy contexts regarding early years outdoor education as outlined above, however both are influenced by the same academic discourse, and this situation allows us to consider whether we might expect teachers across the border to articulate similar aims for outdoor provision for young children.

This study is researching teachers of children aged four to five years (hereon referred to as teachers or early years teachers). This study sets out to explore whether practitioners' stated aims and outcomes for outdoor learning in Wales and England related to curriculum frameworks and/or academic discourse. By comparing the findings from two closely related countries that share a similar discourse we are able to identify what appears to influence or drive those professed aims. There is a gap in our knowledge of how aims are influenced, the findings from this study therefore fill a gap in the existing literature and contribute to our understanding of early years education provision in the UK. The study addresses two research questions (RQs):

#### *Research Questions*

*RQ1* Do teachers in England have different professed aims and outcomes for outdoor learning from teachers in Wales?

*RQ2* How do teachers' aims for children's outdoor learning relate to curriculum frameworks and/or academic discourse?

### **3. Methodology and Methods**

#### *3.1. Research Design*

The research adopted an online survey. The paucity of research concerning teacher attitudes and behaviours to the early years outdoor environment and actual use of the environment prompted the first piece of research conducted by Bilton to gather quantitative and qualitative data through an online survey. The questions aimed to elicit what facilities settings actually had, what staff felt about certain issues and what they said they did in practice. The survey was not asking about the minutia of each day's action but rather about the views and attitudes of the teachers within their particular setting, and in that way gaining knowledge of their understanding as to certain aspects of early years education as well as factual information about the facilities. However, it has to be acknowledged that the replies were written and as action was not observed, the answers can only be construed as a "behavioural indicator of an attitude" ([62], p. 209). The English survey was carried out prior to the Welsh survey and the questions used for the English survey informed those used in the Welsh survey in order to allow a comparison between responses for specific questions related to aims and intentions for outdoor provision in early years settings. This paper is concerned with responses to two questions from the survey. For the English survey they were: What are the specific aims for outdoor activities and how do these relate to your overall aims? And please provide three or four key learning outcomes for outdoor activities. For the Welsh survey: What are your specific aims for outdoor activities? And please provide three or four key learning outcomes for outdoor activities (Complete survey See Appendix A).

#### *3.2. Participants*

The universities in which both authors are based (England and Wales) are engaged with initial teacher education and training and therefore work with schools in their respective geographic areas. These state funded partnership schools have strong relationships with their respective university and were therefore contacted as potential participants, giving a convenience sample.

The range of educational settings in the English sample included small rural schools, urban and community schools, small and large nursery schools, children's centres, large and small primary schools and infant schools with a range of cultures and languages. The schools were within eight local authorities, constituting the most populated area of England, including the widest possible socio-economic backgrounds. Of the schools, 65 per cent were primary, 23 per cent infant, 9 per cent nursery schools, 1 per cent special schools and 2 per cent did not declare their school name or type. The teacher in charge of the class or unit, or in the case of nursery schools, the headteacher,



was required to complete the questionnaire. Of the 350 schools sent the questionnaire, 184 replied, although not all answered all questions; this constituted a 52.6 per cent return rate. Of the 184 teachers who responded, 125 (67.9 per cent) completed the “aims” question and 113 (61.4 per cent) completed the ‘learning outcomes’ item.

In Wales an online survey link was sent to 353 primary schools via email addresses used for correspondence with the University, with an invitation for the Reception and/or Nursery teacher(s) in the school to complete the questionnaire in English or Welsh. The 353 schools in the sample comprised the primary partnership of one Centre of Initial Teacher Education in Wales, 62 per cent of which are English medium (EM) settings and 38 per cent of which are Welsh medium (WM) settings. The partnership schools in Wales that received the invitation cover a geographic region that is approximately a quarter of Wales. Schools ranged from rural to urban, included Welsh medium and English medium schools across the range of socio-cultural contexts found in Wales. As such the possible population of respondents reflected the diversity of education provision in Wales though not representative of it in a statistical sense. The data set comprised responses from 79 schools, a response rate of 22.4 per cent. Initial response rates were similar but then increased in England due to concerted follow up, which was not possible in the Welsh sample. Fifty of the respondents were in EM settings (63 per cent) and 29 in WM settings (37 per cent). The proportion of English/Welsh language of instruction in the response set closely represents this proportion in the greater sample population. The responses from EM and WM settings are considered together since there is no indication that language medium of the setting has an impact on outdoor provision for the Foundation Phase [63–65]. Not all respondents completed all questions; there were 40 responses to the ‘aims’ and ‘learning outcomes’ questions, 50.6 per cent of the total number of respondents.

### 3.3. Instruments

Online questionnaires, presented through a web-based survey tool—surveymonkey, were directed to teachers with qualified teacher status (QTS) of children aged 4–5 years in England and Wales. The questionnaire comprised open and closed elements organised under 24 questions or headings. An information sheet outlining the purpose of the questionnaire and what would happen with the data accompanied it, assuring full anonymity in reporting and the right to withdraw from the study. The covering email (and follow up) and request was for the leaders of the foundation phase or head-teachers in Welsh schools to complete the survey. Working email addresses that addressed heads or administrative teams within school were used. Both these factors reduced the likelihood that staff for whom the survey was not intended would have been asked to complete it. Participants were able to leave their contact details if they so wished or if they required further information. Ethical approval from the respective university ethics boards was gained for both elements of the study; all responses were anonymised and consent was assumed when the respondents took the opportunity to complete the questionnaire. This article only reports data from two questions.

### 3.4. Analysis

The quantitative data (numerical and categorical) were entered into a statistical package, SPSS. The qualitative data for each country was analysed using a purposeful constant comparison coding [66,67]. For each survey the teachers’ qualitative responses were entered onto a database and read through by one of the authors. Themes were generated for each response-set by coding the responses against categories identified from a review of literature [22] and by creating codes to reflect any additional references made in the response-set. Each response was then purposefully compared to others within the code category and across the response-set for the country to establish the similarity of responses within each code and the distinction between each code. The resulting data for each country was read through several times to check the strength of coding. Although the English data were collected and analysed first, the procedure of data analysis was the same for both countries. Finally, each author took 20 per cent of the other country’s response set and coded blind in order to

establish the reliability of the coding process between the authors. The inter-rater reliability was 85%, a high degree of agreement, and Appendix B gives a list of the codes used for equivalent elements in each study.

#### 4. Findings

In this section, we address the first research question. Research Question 2 is then considered in the discussion of those results, reported in the Discussion section.

##### 4.1. RQ1: Do Teachers in England Have Different Professed Aims and Outcomes for Outdoor Learning from Teachers in Wales?

###### 4.1.1. England

Respondents were asked: *What are the specific aims for outdoor activities and how do these relate to your overall aims?* Each reference to an aim listed in the text response by a respondent was recorded; one respondent may have reported a number of aims. The number of aims listed in total was 287. Table 1 lists the coded categories, or *elements*, emerging from the analysis and the relative percentage of responses thus coded.

**Table 1.** English sample. Elements arising from analysis of ‘aims’ question and associated % of coded responses.

Element	N	Percentage (n = 287)
Aims same as for inside	58	20.2%
Physical development	57	19.9%
Dispositions for learning/personal development	35	12.2%
Explorations of the natural world, scientific and environmental study	22	7.7%
Individual needs	22	7.7%
Role play	19	6.6%
Social development	14	4.9%
A different environment	14	4.9%
Open access to resources	9	3.1%
Oral language	8	2.8%
Mathematics and literacy	8	2.8%
No relevant theme to emerge	8	2.8%
Statutory guidance	7	2.4%
Gender and outside	3	1.0%
Real world experiences	3	1.0%

The most common response from the English sample was that the aims for the outdoor environment were the same as the indoor environment; following this the element referred to most often was *physical development*, followed by *dispositions for learning/personal development* then *explorations of the natural world, scientific and environmental study*. Nearly 50 per cent of the respondents noted practice rather than the aims of outdoor learning.

Respondents were then asked to list key learning outcomes for their outdoor provision. Table 2 lists the elements emerging from the analysis of responses and the relative percentage of responses thus coded.

*Physical development*, followed by *dispositions for learning/personal development* were the most commonly referred to elements as learning outcomes for outdoor provision in the English sample. Together these two elements constituted 46.5 per cent, almost half of the learning outcome responses. This reflects the responses given for the most common two elements linked to outdoor provision in the aims question.

**Table 2.** English sample. Elements arising from analysis of ‘learning outcomes’ question and associated % of coded responses.

Element	N	Percentage of all outcomes listed (n = 310)
Physical development	75	24.2%
Dispositions for learning/personal development	69	22.3%
Social development	60	19.4%
Explorations of the natural world, scientific and environmental study	34	11.0%
Communication—verbal	29	9.4%
Communication—written	18	5.8%
Mathematics	12	3.9%
No relevant theme to emerge	9	2.9%
Gender and outside	4	1.3%

#### 4.1.2. Wales

Welsh respondents were asked to list their specific aims for outdoor activities related to Nursery/Reception children. As before, each reference to an aim listed in the text response by a respondent was recorded; one respondent may have reported a number of aims. The number of aims listed in total was 110. Table 3 lists the coded categories, *elements*, emerging from the analysis and the relative percentage of responses thus coded.

**Table 3.** Welsh sample. Elements arising from analysis of ‘aims’ question and associated % of coded responses.

Element	N	Percentage of all aims listed (n = 110)
Physical development/motor skills	17	15.5%
Areas of Learning/Foundation Phase (FP)/the curriculum	13	11.8%
Literacy/vocabulary/linguistic	10	9.1%
Personal Social Education	10	9.1%
Learn about/experience: Natural/environment/the elements (weather)	9	8.2%
Exploring/experimenting	7	7.3%
Being outdoors/learning outside the classroom	7	7.3%
Numeracy	6	6.4%
Practical/problem solving	5	4.5%
Imaginative/stimulating/creative	5	4.5%
Scale (larger)	4	3.6%
Freedom/run wild	3	2.7%
Risk taking	2	1.8%
Messy play	2	1.8%
Same as indoors	2	1.8%
Engagement of children (e.g., ALN, non-attentive indoors)	1	0.9%
Role play	1	0.9%
Enjoyment	1	0.9%
Teamwork/leadership skills	1	0.9%
Observe	1	0.9%

The most common aim for children being outside in the Nursery/Reception years was related to children’s physical development. The next most common aim related to undertaking activity that reflects the Foundation Phase curriculum, specifically to engage with areas of learning in the Foundation Phase. The third most common stated aims was to develop children’s literacy skills, and the forth personal and social development. Explicit curricula aims accounted for 60 per cent of the responses, with just over a third of the responses concerned with practice rather than aims.

Respondents were then asked to provide key learning outcomes for outdoor activities. Each stated learning outcome was classified as being related to one of the elements identified in the analysis of aims provided by the respondents. Any learning outcomes given that had not occurred in the list of aims given by respondents is marked by \* in Table 4. In total 116 learning outcomes were recorded.

**Table 4.** Welsh sample: Elements arising from analysis of ‘learning outcomes’ question and associated % of coded responses.

Element	N	Percentage of all outcomes listed (n = 116)
Literacy/vocabulary /linguistic	22	19.00%
Learn about/experience: Natural/environment/the elements (weather)	19	16.40%
Physical development/motor skills	16	13.80%
PSE	16	13.80%
Numeracy/mathematical development	15	12.90%
Exploring/experimenting	12	10.30%
Teamwork/leadership skills	4	3.40%
Practical/problem solving	3	2.60%
Areas of Learning/FP/the curriculum	2	1.70%
Enjoyment	2	1.70%
Imaginative/stimulating/creative	2	1.70%
Being outdoors/learning outside the classroom	1	0.90%
Risk taking	1	0.90%
Developing thinking skills *	1	0.90%

Note: \* indicates a learning outcomes provided that had not occurred in the list of aims given by respondents.

The most commonly referred to learning outcomes in the Welsh sample differ from the most commonly stated aims. The former related to *literacy development*, *learning about the environment*, and *physical development*, these three elements accounting for 49.2 per cent, just under half the total responses provided and a lower percentage of the aims. Similarly, the *numeracy* accounted for 12.9 per cent of responses regarding learning outcomes (12.9 per cent) but only 6.4 per cent of stated aims.

This analysis indicates that there are differences concerning aims and outcomes for outdoor learning in the responses from Welsh and English teachers and also in the order of importance of these respective aspects of outdoor education, as follows:

- There were differences in the order of importance of aims and outcomes for each country and between the two countries;
- Physical development was the most frequently cited aim for outdoor provision in both countries;
- Over a fifth of English teachers stated that they did not differentiate between aims for children’s learning in the indoor and outdoor space. In contrast only 2 per cent of Welsh responses indicated the same;
- The Welsh respondents made considerably more reference to literacy and numeracy-related aims for their outdoor provision than their English respondents. Just under a fifth of the English learning outcomes were related to literacy and numeracy-related learning compared with almost a third of the Welsh responses; and just over 5 per cent of the English respondents referred to literacy and numeracy aims, whereas just over 15 per cent did so in the Welsh sample;
- Both the English and Welsh teachers identified personal, social and dispositional aims at a similar proportion (around a fifth of responses). A much higher proportion of the English teachers cited learning outcomes that were personal, social and dispositional related (over 40 per cent) than did the Welsh teachers (under a third of responses);
- Both the English and Welsh responses include non-aims based replies, which relate to practice and action within the educational setting. For example gender and outside, open access to resources, messy play and freedom to run wild. Although these might all be pertinent to early years education they are not aims as such, but actions. The frequency of such responses are much higher with the English replies at nearly 50 per cent and 28 per cent with the Welsh replies.
- Taken together, Personal Social Development and Physical Development elements account for 66 per cent of the English learning outcome responses and 44 per cent of the Welsh responses.

## 5. Discussion

This study sought to answer the question *Do teachers in England have different professed aims and learning outcomes for outdoor learning from teachers in Wales?* Despite some possible limitations to this research including some ambiguity in being certain about who responded to the survey, the probability that those who were more oriented towards using the outdoors did reply than those who were ambivalent and a lack of follow up in the Welsh survey so there was a reduced response rate, we still believe the results are informative.

The findings indicate that there appear to be differences in the responses from those surveyed. For respondents in both countries, there was little connection between aims and outcome responses, suggesting perhaps that there is a mismatch in understanding about the link between an aim in education and the subsequent learning outcome. It comes as no surprise that physical development is most frequently cited as an aim for outdoor provision in both countries, but it is of note that Welsh respondents made considerably more reference to literacy and numeracy-related aims for their outdoor provision than English respondents. This difference was similarly reflected in the learning outcomes provided by respondents; just under a fifth of the English learning outcomes were related to literacy and numeracy-related learning compared with almost a third of the Welsh responses. That over a fifth of English teachers in the sample stated that they did not differentiate between aims for children's learning in the indoor and outdoor environment is noteworthy compared to the barely 2 per cent of Welsh responses indicating the same. It is also interesting to note that despite both English and Welsh teachers identifying personal, social and dispositional aims at a similar proportion (around a fifth of responses), a much higher proportion of the English teachers cited learning outcomes that were personal, social and dispositional related (over 40%) than did the Welsh teachers (well under a third of responses).

There are a number of ways in which these apparent differences may be explained and these relate to the study's second research question: *How do teachers' aims for children's outdoor learning relate to curriculum frameworks and/or academic discourse?* It appears that the emphasis on making use of the outdoor space as a learning environment, inherent in the Foundation Phase documentation and associated guidance in Wales, is reflected in Welsh teachers' aims for provision in their outdoor spaces. The Welsh Government's Outdoor Learning Handbook [41], the guidance document provided to accompany the statutory curriculum, makes explicit reference to the outdoor environment and emphasises the expectation that children will regularly make use of the outdoors as a learning space. The relatively high proportion of aims and learning outcomes that are associated with literacy and numeracy development may reflect the impact of the recent high profile given to the Literacy Numeracy Framework policy initiative in Wales. Although literacy and numeracy were included explicitly in the new English early years guidance in 2012, they are not part of a drive across all phases of education as in Wales. Equally the statutory documentation in England is now a very slimmed-down booklet with little supporting material. The findings of this study suggest that Welsh teachers aim and plan to use their outdoor spaces explicitly for curriculum-related learning more so than their English counterparts who appear not to identify such specific curriculum-related learning outcomes but to emphasise personal, social and dispositional aspects of development for young children when they are outside. This observation is supported by the relative proportions of responses that identify aims and learning outcomes that relate to physical development. A fifth of English teachers' responses stated physical development-related aims and a quarter physical development-related learning outcomes. In the Welsh sample, under a sixth of the responses stated physical development-related aims and fewer stated physical development-related learning outcomes. The relative paucity of emphasis in the English EYFS documentation for making use of the outdoors as a learning space is arguably reflected in the responses from the English sample, in that it is not viewed as a curriculum space as such but more of a space for physical development. The Welsh and English surveys recorded responses from teachers who were unclear as to the difference between an aim and the action within the setting and this again may reflect both the Government documentation and academic literature.

This research indicates how the divergence of education-related policy and curriculum appears to have impacted upon the way in which practitioners express their aims for outdoor learning in England and Wales. The values underpinning the relative curricular documents appear to emerge in the intended practice of those involved in early years provision in both countries. In initial teacher education there is an expectation that the statutory frameworks will be taught but also the academic discourse matters and will be acted upon. In addition, yet this research suggests that policy pressures do seem to “trump” the messages from the discourse in terms of practice. Although in England prior to 2010 there was significant Governmental support for the outdoor environment as a teaching and learning space, this has now dwindled, perhaps as a result of a change in Government. The values underpinning the academic discourse related to provision for outdoor activity for early years children is much less prominent in the responses to the surveys from English and Welsh teachers.

The findings reported in this paper further our understanding of what drives the experiences of young children in early childhood educational settings; they further our understanding of the role of curricular context for early childhood educational provision in England and Wales. This is important in an era of significant curriculum change in Wales, especially as the new curriculum proposals have at their heart the development of clearly articulated purposes for the curriculum [68]. The Foundation Phase in Wales is still a young curriculum, and one for which school leaders, inspectors and some early years teachers require further theoretical and practical preparation [64,65]. We would argue that, as the Foundation Phase is developed following the recent evaluative reports, it is the development of the collective understanding of the aims and purposes of the Foundation Phase that requires attention rather than a simplistic exemplification of “best practice”. In terms of the English evidence it would seem wasteful to present evidence that outdoor learning is very important and only a few years later to ignore this evidence. Finally, for both England and Wales it would seem of benefit to make clearer not only the understanding of aims and outcomes but also the necessary link between the aim or purpose of education and the planned learning outcomes for children, given there is now strong evidence that high quality early years education (including outdoor provision) can make a real difference to young children’s outcomes and more so for those in “vulnerable” groups [8].

**Author Contributions:** Bilton conceived and designed the experiments; Bilton and Waters performed the experiments, analyzed the data, contributed reagents/materials/analysis tools, wrote the paper.

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## Appendix A

### Early Years Foundation Stage outdoor facilities and staff attitudes and behaviours questionnaire

1. How many classes access the outdoor area? 1,2,3,4.
2. What is the maximum number of children able to access the outdoor area at any one time? Up to 10, 11–20, 21–30, 31–40, 41–50, 51–60, 61–70, 71–80, 81–90, 91–100, more than 100.
3. How long is the outdoor area available to the children in one session? (A session denoting a morning or afternoon). Up to 15 minutes, up to 30 minutes, up to 45 minutes, up to 1 hour, up to 1 hour and 15 minutes, up to 1 hour and 30 minutes, up to 1 hour and 45 minutes, up to 2 hours, up to 2 hours and 15 minutes, up to 2 hours and 45 minutes, up to 3 hours.
4. Is outdoor freeflow (freely available during the day) or timetabled (fixed period of time every day)? If timetabled, how long is this for and at what time? If freeflow, are there any restrictions?
5. Thinking about the following list, which factors create drawbacks to practice? (select all that apply) Access to and from the outdoor space, Size, Layout, Fixed equipment, Weather, Lack of seating, The look of the place, Storage, Other (please specify).
6. What are your specific aims for outdoor activities and how do these relate to your overall aims?
7. Please provide three or four key learning outcomes for outdoor activities?
8. Do staff plan for outside activities? If yes, could you comment on the following: are these activities planned with the same detail, as those inside? Is the planning for inside and outside activities integrated? Do you do spontaneous planning?



9. How many fixed pieces of equipment are in the outdoor area? Fixed: attached to the ground and cannot be moved. Please list items and if possible how popular each item is.
10. How many three wheeler/tricycles do you have? 1+, 5+. How many are used at one time?
11. Would you say that your outdoor space is an effective size? Yes, No, I do not know.
12. Roughly how large is the outdoor space?
13. Does the outside environment lend itself to different activities/resources compared to inside? If yes, what resources and activities?
14. Do any of the children behave differently outside compared to inside? If so, in what ways?
15. Do you consider that the children view inside and outside as different? If yes, in what ways?
16. Is children' learning different outside compared to in? If yes, please explain.
17. Do boys and girls play together outside? If so, what types of games/activities/resources do they play with together?
18. Can children access resources for themselves? Yes, No, Sometimes, Somethings. If no, why not?
19. What do staff see as their role outside?
20. What do staff and children talk about when outside?
21. Using a scale 110 (1: little 10: a lot) indicate how much opportunity children have to control/change/modify their environment, within your school?
22. Kritchensky suggests that resources can be categorised as: simple (only one type of use a bike), complex (having a double dimension, e.g., finger painting at a table) or super units (multi use, such as blocks). What would you say you have the majority of?
23. Is there anything else you would like to say about the outdoor environment?
24. Many thanks for taking the time to complete this study. If you have any further comments or questions about the outdoor environment, either write below or contact...I hope you found this a useful exercise.

## Appendix B

**Table B1.** Equivalent coding for elements between the samples.

Element England	Element Wales
Physical development	Physical development/motor skills
Statutory Guidance	Areas of Learning/Foundation Phase (FP)/the curriculum
Explorations of the natural world, scientific and environmental study	Learn about/experience: Natural/environment/the elements (weather)
Dispositions for learning/personal development Social development	Teamwork/leadership skills Exploring/experimenting Practical/problem solving Personal Social Education
Oral language Mathematics and literacy	Literacy/vocabulary/linguistic Numeracy
Individual Needs Gender and Outside	Engagement of children (e.g., ALN, non-attentive indoors)
Role Play	Role play
A Different Environment Real World Experiences	Being outdoors/learning outside the classroom
Aims same as for inside	Same as indoors
No relevant theme to emerge	Observe
Open Access to Resources	<i>No equivalent responses</i>
<i>No equivalent responses</i>	Freedom/run wild Risk taking Messy play Enjoyment Scale (larger) Imaginative/stimulating/creative

*Responses relate to the literature canon*

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